

Turning the holiday blues green

By Liz Johnson Correspondent | Posted: Sunday, December 1, 2013 12:15 am

If this is one of those years that you're wallowing in "Bah! Humbug!" and looking for something to lift your holiday spirits, grab your calendar and make this note: The Christmas in Doylestown House Tour and Boutique begins at 6 p.m. Friday and resumes at 11 a.m. Saturday.

There are a couple of reasons why this year's tour will make your heart soar: (1) It's the 20th year of the event hosted by St. Paul's Episcopal Church on Oakland Avenue, and (2) this year's tour includes, for the first time, the James-Lorah Memorial Home, opened by its owner — the Village Improvement Association.

The association will add its own twist to the festivities. Not only will the house be decorated in Charles Dickens' fashion, but some VIA members will dress in period costume to greet visitors.

On Friday night at 7, members of the Doylestown Hospital Comfort Choir will sing in the Lorah auditorium while carolers from the Bucks County Choral Society perform outside. On Saturday, Central Bucks South students will perform from 2 to 3 p.m., and VIA member Sally Steinbach will play the piano on Friday night and Saturday from 1 to 2 p.m.

The house tour is a Doylestown holiday tradition. Each year, a family volunteers to open their borough house and have it decorated for the holiday by a group of church volunteers.

Decorators supplement what the homeowners have and "decorate every corner" of the houses on the tour, according to Kay Johnson, the tour's organizer.

Each house is customized with greens, trees and decorations that complement the period, style and architecture of the building, said Johnson.

Since 1992, the church has decorated 75 homes and raised more than \$100,000 to combat homelessness in Doylestown. The four houses on this year's tour range in date from 1844 to 1928, and range in style from arts and crafts to bungalow to Victorian meets Pottery Barn.

At the end of the tour, visitors sample tea and cookies made by organizers. There's also a boutique at the church hall that includes the Christmas Attic, where creatively inspired visitors can buy inexpensive, "gently used" Christmas decorations to put up in their own homes.

"People are waiting at the door when we open at 5 p.m. (Friday)," said Johnson.

In mid-November, two dozen volunteers finished baking more than 7,000 cookies, which will be sold in one-pound boxes.

“It’s a nice selection of butter cookies,” Johnson said.

Tickets cost \$30 and proceeds are split between St. Paul’s and the Bucks County Housing Group, with the funds earmarked to provide housing to the homeless.

“Homelessness is an invisible problem in a county like Bucks,” said Melissa Mantz of the Bucks County Housing Group.

The money raised by St. Paul’s is used to pay electric bills, help with car repairs so people can get to work, pay medical bills or offset education costs.

“It makes such a big difference to us,” said Mantz. “They go all-out and it’s such a blessing.”

This year, the VIA will receive a portion of the ticket revenue for the preservation of the James-Lorah Memorial Home.

“We wanted to open the house for tours, “ said Phyllis Morris, president of the James-Lorah Memorial Home Committee. “Last year, we did it on our own, but this year, we looked into joining St. Paul’s which has such a huge house tour every year. They were thrilled.”

The VIA owns both the James-Lorah Memorial Home and Doylestown Hospital. It’s pledged \$1 million to build a new maternity wing, so some of the proceeds from the tour will go toward that effort.

The 118-year-old, all-women community-service organization is always looking for new members, said Morris, and will be giving out information to anyone who might be interested in joining.

Johnson said there’s always a buzz in the parish hall when tour-goers sip their tea and enjoy their sandwiches and sweets.

“Everybody’s so excited about Christmas,” she said.